

An NCAA coach's blueprint for success: wins on the field or achievement in the classroom?

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Student-athletes must be able to balance education and athletics. Are these young men and women students first? Or does being part of a college team mean athletics take priority over education? If student-athletes fail in the classroom, they are ineligible to play on the field; however, if they fail on the field, any hopes of playing at the professional level are lost. To what degree is a coach responsible for the academic success or failure of a student-athlete?

Collegiate sports are a big industry. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) makes close to \$1 billion annually, and college athletics as a whole generate around \$12 billion per year. Millions of Americans tune in to college football and basketball games annually. Colleges with successful programs benefit in many ways including increased ticket sales, payments for broadcasting rights, alumni donations, and college applications. Colleges and athletic administrators have a lot to gain in the form of revenue, endorsements, prestige, and coveted recruits when a team is successful.

With so much riding on the success of college sports teams, one might think a coach's success or failure depends solely upon the team's record. However, there is debate surrounding what defines a coach's success. Does athletic performance or students' academic success determine whether a NCAA football or basketball coach is successful? In [Academics vs. athletics: career concerns for NCAA Division I coaches](#) (National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 22120, March 2016), Christopher Avery, Brain Cadman, and Gavin Cassar analyze how student-athlete academic performance affects a coach's chances of promotion and job retention.

This study is based on 10 years of data (2004–05 to 2013–14) from the NCAA website including academic data for the players on each team and the job history of all Division 1 basketball and football coaches who were employed during this period. In measuring team success, the authors identified additional measures beyond wins and losses. Successful teams are invited to post season tournaments such as the NCAA and NIT tournaments for basketball and bowl games for football.

The NCAA firmly believes that college coaches are accountable for each player's APR. In support of this belief, the NCAA adopted Proposition 48 in 1983, which sets minimum academic standards for athletes. According to Proposition 48, high school athletes must maintain a 2.0 GPA and get a minimum combined verbal and math score of 700 on the SAT to meet eligibility requirements. In 1990, colleges had to report graduations rates, which were known as Federal Graduation Rate to the federal government and the NCAA.

In 2003, the NCAA introduced the Academic Progress Rate (APR), which tracks academic eligibility and continuing enrollment for student–athletes with athletic scholarships. A higher APR means that, on a semester–by–semester basis, fewer student–athletes have dropped out or been declared academically ineligible. The NCAA imposes penalties on colleges if they fail to meet the proscribed minimum APR, including loss of scholarships, loss of practice time, and being declared ineligible for post-season play. Though the APR penalties were highly controversial, the result was that NCAA football and basketball APR scores increased by 30 points per team during the 2004–05 and 2013–14 seasons. During the 2006–07 season, roughly 15 percent of NCAA football and basketball teams were penalized for scores that fell below the APR threshold. Recently, the APR penalties were dealt to less than 5 percent of the NCAA football and basketball teams.

The study concludes that the introduction of the APR has improved student–athletes’ academic performance. Despite these efforts, the authors find that salary increases, renegotiations, and promotions are positively related to the performance of his or her team on the field or the court. Student success in the classroom can raise a coach’s chance of retention, but does not affect his or her chance of promotion. Success on the field can have a significant financial impact on an NCAA football or basketball coach. In 40 of 50 states, the college football or basketball coach is the highest paid public employee. There is no measurable incentive for a coach whose student–athletes perform beyond the minimum APR standard. Results from the study show that a 50-point increase in a team’s APR has the same effect for a coach as an additional win per season for football coaches and two wins per season for basketball coaches. Student achievement in the classroom will help a coach keep his job, but success on the field is a much bigger factor in financial incentives and career growth in terms of possible promotions for an NCAA coach.

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